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“If kids don’t feel safe they don’t do anything”: Young People’s views on seeking and receiving help from Children’s Social Care Services in England.

Alison Jobe and Sarah Gorin.

ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from qualitative interviews with 24 young people (11-17 years) who have been referred to Children's Social Care Services in England. The article explores young people's experiences of help seeking, and their experiences of receiving help for maltreatment through statutory agencies. A central finding is the importance of relationships for young people when seeking and receiving help. It is through trusting relationships with professionals that young people are most likely to disclose maltreatment and/or engage with services. The article concludes that young people's expectations and needs are not always met by the current safeguarding system and that the system needs to become more child-centred if it is to address the concerns maltreated young people have consistently voiced through research.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores research findings about young people’s views on seeking and receiving help from Children’s Social Care Services in England in order to consider how the safeguarding system could be improved to meet the needs of young people. There is a small body of research that has considered how children and young people who have experienced abuse seek help, in order to improve the ways in which we can support more young people to disclose. Previous research has highlighted that children are most likely to talk to someone with whom they have an existing relationship- usually friends or family (Hill 1999; Featherstone and Evans 2004) and that young people especially, are more likely to disclose to a peer initially rather than a professional (Morrow, 1998). A review by Featherstone and Evans (2004) found that whilst younger children are most likely to seek help from parents, other relatives and teachers, young people as they get older increasingly see friends as their main support. Cossar et al (2011) have argued that it is important for professionals to understand the child's existing support network and establish who a child feels able to confide in to successfully protect children from harm.

The reasons why children and young people do not disclose have also been explored in the literature. These are largely due to fear of the abuser; fear of the consequences of telling for themselves, other family members and the abuser; fear of not being believed; shame; and lack of trust that anyone will make their situation better (Butler and Williamson, 1994; Gorin 2004; Featherstone and Evans 2004, Willow, 2009; and others). Baginsky (2001) says that it is impossible to generalise about the conditions that lead to disclosure of sexual abuse, but also identified the following factors that make disclosure more likely: a child's educational awareness; anger; perpetrator proximity; peer influence; a safe environment or a precipitating event.

Few studies in England have talked directly to young people about their experiences of the referral process to Children's Social Care Services (Rees et al, 2010). However, there are some studies that have explored children and young people's views of the child protection system more broadly which are relevant to this paper. In 2002, Bell interviewed 27 children and young people about their experiences of the child protection process in one local authority in England. Bell found that most of the children and young people had a valued relationship with at least one social worker but that their experiences of social workers overall was mixed. Bell concluded that: "one of the most effective ways of promoting and protecting the human rights of children in need is through a relationship of trust" (Bell 2002: 3). More recently, Cossar, et al (2011) interviewed 26 children and young people about their experiences of the child protection system. They found that children and young people wanted to be involved in decision making and also found that a good relationship with a social worker was central to young people feeling engaged in child protection processes. The importance of relationships between young people and practitioners, and of involving children and young people in decision making, are also common and reoccurring themes in research undertaken with Looked After children and young people (Munro 2001; Leeson 2007, 2010; McLeod 2007, 2010).

Elsewhere, in Scotland, Woolfson et al (2010) interviewed 11 children about their experience of the child protection system and found that young people were keen to be more involved in decision making about their lives and were capable of being involved. They concluded that the current Child Protection System in Scotland did not

always allow young people to be as involved in decision-making as they would have liked. In Ireland, Buckley et al (2010) interviewed a range of service users, including 13 young people in-between the ages of 13 and 23. They found that despite service users having opportunities to participate in the child protection process, they still found the experience intimidating and stressful. However, the development of good relationships between workers and service users could counteract these negative experiences.

Previous research has consistently shown that relationships with professionals are valued by children and young people when they feel their views have been taken into account; they are listened to and kept informed about what is happening (Butler and Williamson, 1994; Hill 1999; Osbourne, 2001; Gorin, 2004; Freake et al 2007; McLeod, 2007, 2010; Willow; 2009; Buckley et al, 2010). However a number of obstacles have been identified in the available research which may inhibit the building of positive relationships between young people and social workers. In Munro's research these included: "frequent changes of social worker, lack of effective voice at reviews, lack of confidentiality and, linked to this, lack of a confidante" (Munro 2001: 129). Subsequent research studies, including our own study, have reiterated and confirmed these findings (Bell 2002; Leeson 2007, 2010; McLeod 2007, 2010; Beckett and McKeigue 2010; Rees et al 2010; Cossar et al 2011).

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The findings presented in this paper were part of a larger study (Rees et al 2010) for which an international literature review, national policy review, vignettes survey on professional attitudes and a study of practice were undertaken. In this paper we concentrate on findings from the practice study undertaken by the NSPCC in which we undertook face-to-face interviews with 24 young people and interviewed 56 professionals from a range of agencies by telephone. This article focuses upon findings from the interviews with young people. Young people were accessed in six different local authority areas and represented a range of ethnic backgrounds and ages.

The research had ethical approval from the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences (IRISS) Ethics Committee, University of York and the ethics committee of

the Association of the Directors of Children's Services (ADCS). Ethical approval was also obtained from participating local authorities, where required.

Interviews with young people

Undertaking research with children and young people who have experienced the child protection system is not straightforward and many studies that have set out to do so have struggled to access and recruit participants (Cleaver et al, 2006; Leeson 2007; McLeod 2007; Farmer and Lutman, 2010). In our study, the process of accessing young people was time-consuming and involved a great deal of determination in terms of negotiations with local authorities, individual service providers and young people. The research used professionals in voluntary and statutory services to help recruit young people willing to participate. This had the advantage that professionals were able to approach young people who were already engaged with services and who they felt may be interested. The professionals provided them with written information about the study, enabling them to make an informed choice about participation.

The limitation of this approach, however was that those who were referred, but did not receive a service were not included in the sample. The original study design intended to recruit young people who had not received a service via a letter to those who were recorded as having been in touch with Children's Social Care Services, but who had not received an intervention. However this approach was not pursued as it was considered to involve too much potential risk to young people and researchers and would have required more resources than were available in this project. Potential concerns included: that young people may still be experiencing problems at home and a letter about previous contact may exacerbate risks to them especially if parents were unaware of a referral being made; ensuring interviewer safety if interviews are conducted within young people's homes; and ensuring young people were adequately supported post interview.

The twenty four young people who participated ranged in age from 11 to 18 years old, and included five children who were aged 11-14, thirteen 15-16 year olds and six 17-18 year olds. Fourteen boys participated and ten girls. The majority of the young people were from White British backgrounds (n=18), one young person was British-Asian and the sample includes some Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children who

were originally from Afghanistan (n=3) and Eritrea (n=2). Young people were asked about their experiences of seeking help, being referred to Children's Social Care Services and subsequent initial responses. All interviews with young people were undertaken face-to-face so appropriate support could be provided if necessary and interviews were recorded with young people's consent.

Researchers endeavoured to ensure that young participants were not left in distress as a result of the interview and where appropriate at the end of the interview offered young people informal support, reassurance and information. This included information regarding access to any appropriate sources of local help and services. As young people were recruited via children's social care services or projects, they also already had support in place should they need it after the interview. Young people were asked to give their written consent to participate and the consent form was explained to them prior to the interview. When explaining the consent form, young people were made aware that the interviews were confidential, unless there were any new concerns about risks of significant harm raised in the process of the interview. In these instances, concerns would be discussed with young people and the relevant supporting professional at the end of the interview and appropriate action taken. In three cases young people used the interviews as a means to access further information and support, but there were no cases in which new maltreatment was disclosed. A few weeks after the interview, young people were sent feedback forms to find out their views about participation. Feedback was positive and no participants raised any concerns.

The twenty-four young people who were interviewed for our study either had social care intervention from an early age, or had first come to the attention of Children's Social Care Services in-between the ages of 11-17. Their maltreatment experiences fell into two groups- those who had suffered maltreatment from an early age continuing into adolescence and those who had suffered maltreatment in adolescence only. For those young people who had social care intervention from an early age (n=6), difficulties and consequently social care interventions had escalated in between the ages of 11-17. This was due to a number of factors including escalating difficulties in family relationships; violence, risk taking behaviour or externalizing/

internalising behaviours by the young person; and/or new disclosures by the young person concerning maltreatment which was taking place.

Among the young people we interviewed it was more common to first come to the attention of Children's Social Care Services when aged 11-17 (n=18). Some young people had a history of undisclosed abuse within, or from outside the family. This abuse was first disclosed by the young person aged 11-17. Others were referred in relation to new incidents of abuse which occurred when the young person was aged 11-17. In these latter cases, new safeguarding risks often arose as young people became more independent from family members and/or encountered new people and situations.

The outcomes of the referral to Children's Social Care Services for the twenty-four young people interviewed vary. Some have been taken into local authority care as a result of their referral (n=16). Others have had social care intervention in their lives for short periods of time. The outcome for each young person depended upon the nature of the referral, their family situation and circumstances and the safeguarding measures considered appropriate in each case. The 24 young people interviewed had different maltreatment experiences and differing levels of interaction with Children's Social Care Services and individual social workers. Nevertheless, common themes were identified in the young people's accounts and these are explored in this article.

Analysis of interview data

The interviews with young people were recorded and transcribed. Interview notes reflecting our observations and recollections of the interview were also written up after each interview to enable the research team to reflect on the interview content and context. The interview transcripts were analysed using NVivo. Common and unique themes were identified among the 24 young people's responses in relation to young people's experiences of seeking help and their experiences of receiving help. The research is qualitative in nature and presents the experiences of 24 young people. In this respect, there are likely to be themes identified in our analysis which reflect the experiences of other young people who have been referred to Children's Social Care Services, while there may also be themes presented in this article that do not. The findings represent young people's recollections of events and their views on how

these events have affected them. In this respect, our findings may arguably be a partial representation of events as we are unable to present the views or recollections of any of the professionals' young people refer to. However, it is young people's understandings, perceptions and feelings about help seeking and receiving help that we intended to explore. It is through young people's understanding of their experiences that we have interpreted our findings and we have endeavoured to represent young people's perceptions of their experiences as authentically as possible without imposing our own (adult) interpretation of events.

FINDINGS

The twenty four young people interviewed for the practice study were in contact with Children's Social Care Services for various reasons. Young people who had been in contact with social workers for most of their lives often did not remember the initial referral, but could recall later referrals and circumstances in their lives.

Young people and professionals interviewed for the wider study cited a range of reasons for referrals to child protection services. These included concerns about maltreatment, witnessing domestic violence and parental illness (and subsequent incapacity to care). Reasons for the referral of young people also included a wider range of issues that disproportionately affect 11-17 year olds, such as homelessness, being thrown out of home, mental health problems, alcohol/drug misuse, behavioural problems, risk-taking behaviour, violence and conflict with parents. These problems were often interconnected and occurred alongside maltreatment.

In this section we will first explore young people's experiences of seeking help, who young people are likely to turn to for help and the importance of relationships to young people for the disclosure of maltreatment. We will then consider young people's experiences of receiving help and the significance of the relationship between young people and social workers to young people's engagement with statutory services.

Young people's experiences of seeking help

Young people were asked about their experiences prior to referral and if they had tried to seek help from anyone or told anyone what was happening. Not all of the young

people we interviewed had actively sought help and those who had sought help from others reported a range of experiences. It is important to note that for many of the young people interviewed disclosure was not a one off incident but an on-going process which took place throughout the referral process and while young people were in the child protection system (see also Baginsky 2001). This process of disclosure and young people's ability to disclose abuse or neglect was closely linked to their relationship with professionals.

As has been found in other research, many of the young people interviewed said they first spoke to their peers about the abuse they were experiencing (Featherstone and Evans, 2004; Hill 1999; Gorin 2004; Butler and Williamson, 1994). Young people often talked to peers about abuse before approaching a family member or professional and this was sometimes a long time before approaching anyone else for help. Additionally where professionals were approached it was often on the advice of, or with the support of, the peers they had initially disclosed to.

Some young people in our study did seek help from family members and a parent was often the first adult a young person would disclose abuse to. Where a parent was the perpetrator of abuse, young people had disclosed to other relatives such as grandparents, or an aunt or uncle. In a number of these cases young people were either not believed by family members or were discouraged from seeking help outside of the family. Often, young people subsequently felt dissuaded from seeking help outside of the family as they felt they would not be believed. Some young people were referred to Children's Social Care Services after disclosing abuse to a family member, but this was usually when the perpetrator of abuse was independent of the family.

Whilst friends and family members were most commonly approached first, when young people did talk to professionals it was most often teachers. This reflects findings from other research (Featherstone and Evans, 2004, and others). Some young people were unclear which professionals they could have approached for help and felt that professionals who might be able to help were not visible to them when they were looking for someone to disclose to.

Young people had varied experiences with the professionals they approached. Some young people were very positive about the relationship they had with school teachers and the help they had received, while others felt unsupported by their school teachers and felt that their disclosures had not been taken seriously enough.

...it would have been nice to have a little bit more help and support from them. I told my form teacher everything that was going on at home with my step dad's violence and stuff. And she was like well I'll talk it out with your head of year and everything and we can see what can be done ... and then nothing was ever done from there.

Laura, aged 15

Where young people had approached teachers this was usually a teacher known to them with whom they described having an established and valued relationship.

it's all about trust isn't it- some people you get on with and some people you don't like- some people you can trust and some people you can't so I don't know really just keep trying to be approachable and then people would probably go to you.

Lisa, aged 15

Lisa's comments are similar to many other young people interviewed for this study. Young people appreciated having space to express themselves and time to develop relationships of trust with a professional. Young people frequently linked this to their ability to disclose to a professional.

Many young people discussed how difficult it was to seek help. Young people were often concerned that they would not be believed by those they told or simply did not know who to tell. Some young people were worried that if they told anyone what was happening in the family home they would be placed in local authority care. Fears about being placed 'in care' often led young people to holding back information from professionals. A number of young people were concerned about and unsure what would happen if they did tell someone about their maltreatment and of the consequences for themselves and/or their families. Young people were often reluctant to expose family members and were concerned about the effect of exposure on the abuser and the rest of the family. Another concern expressed by some young people

was that they had feared the reaction of their abuser. Some young people feared that telling someone might escalate the problem and/or escalate the abuse against them.

It is clear from the young people interviewed for this study, and from other research, that disclosing abuse is difficult for young people and that young people disclose with many concerns about the consequences of their disclosure (Baginsky, 2001; Featherstone and Evans, 2004; Mullender et al, 2002; Ungar et al, 2009). Supporting the findings of other research, young people indicated that the most important elements for disclosure of abuse were confidence in themselves, feeling safe to speak out and trust in others.

Interviewer: *So what do you think might help young people speak out?*

Emma: *Confidence and safety. That's the only reason why I didn't speak out for nine months because of low self esteem and I was terrified. Have to have the confidence and they have to have a big safety net around them cos if kids don't feel safe they don't do anything.*

Emma, aged 14

Young people's experiences of receiving help from Children's Social Care Services

Young people often judged the service they received from Children's Social Care Services by their contact with social workers (Hill 1999). For most young people this contact represented the work of Children's Social Care Services and their relationships with social workers were central to disclosure and protection. Some young people described the relationship they had with social workers positively, while other young people were less positive. Young people's experiences often differed at different points in the referral/protection process usually as a direct result of interaction with the individual social workers they had encountered.

Young people valued having a consistent relationship with a professional they felt they could trust. Young people spoke positively about their social workers when they had regular meetings with them and when social workers had time to work with young people and build relationships.

Interviewer: *And what about the second social worker?*

Laura: *She's really ... I've still got her now, she's really, really nice...Like she's really easy to talk to and really chatty. She's a lot more helpful than the first one, like I've had regular meetings with her, and we've done like mind maps of family and like putting people who are closer in the inner circles and stuff like that.*

Laura, aged 15

The first social worker Laura refers to was a duty social worker and therefore would not be able to develop the same relationship with her as her second social worker, who was Laura's social worker while she was Looked After by the local authority. A number of young people we interviewed who had long term social care involvement had developed positive relationships with social workers; however, this appeared to be less likely during the referral process itself. Many young people were unhappy about having an inconsistent relationship with social workers during the referral process. This was due to young people seeing their designated social worker intermittently and/or for short periods of time during the referral process, and/or encountering a number of different social workers.

I think one of the main things is that when a social worker is designated, you should keep that social worker for as long as possible...I really think that they should try and keep that same social worker with that child for as long as possible, so then a relationship can get built up, the trust can get built up. And then at the end of the day the social worker will find out a lot more... I think if they expect children to tell them things and put trust in them, then you need to put the work in and be with them for a long period of time, and just make a relationship with them.

Anna, aged 17

Many young people expressed frustration at being assigned a new social worker when they were passed between services within a local authority, especially when they had built up a good relationship with their previous social worker. Also, young people did not like telling a new social worker their stories, as they found it difficult to speak about/ relive difficult experiences.

I feel that I'm repeating myself over and over and over and over again. I'm telling the same stories, like what's happened ... cos they've always asked ... and you've got tell them ... every time you've got a new social worker... I don't like going back and talking about all of it.

Chris, aged 15

Some young people described their frustration at having very little contact with social workers or infrequent meetings with their assigned social workers during the referral process. Young people were often upset that they were unable to contact their social worker. This was sometimes because they were not given contact details for their social worker or because when they did contact their social worker they were consistently unavailable. As a result of this lack of contact some young people concluded that social workers were not engaged in helping them.

A number of young people described social work involvement as confusing and many seemed unclear about what had happened during the safeguarding process. Young people often were unsure about who professionals were and what their roles were. This was described by many young people as more of a problem when first referred or at the early stages of involvement with Children's Social Care Services. However, some young people we interviewed were still unsure who some of the professionals they were in contact with were, or of their roles, later in the process.

Some young people felt that they had not been listened to, that their views had not been taken into account and they did not feel informed of what was happening to them. Many of the young people interviewed were unclear about the safeguarding processes they were subject to and some did not understand what having a child protection plan meant.

Another obstacle to building positive relationships, which is perhaps specific to this age group, was tension between the needs of young people and parents, a specific example of such tension was given by a young person, Fatima on the issue of information sharing and confidentiality. Fatima, was physically abused by her father and as a result was given a child protection plan by Children's Social Care Services. She wanted to be able to confide in her social worker about what was happening at

home, but this need was not met because the social worker would then inform her parents what she had said. She describes how this would create additional problems in the family and that on occasions the abuse would escalate as a result. This made Fatima reluctant to tell her social worker what was going on in the family home.

Interviewer: Did you understand what was happening or what people were doing?

Fatima: No, it all it felt like what ever I told them they would go and tell my mum.....so I would just stop telling them

Interviewer: What did you expect to happen or what did you want to happen?

Fatima: I thought that they were going to help me and not tell my mum when I told them stuff.....

Interviewer: Do you feel that they listened to what you had to say?

Fatima: No, they listened to what my mum had to say.

Fatima, aged 15

Some young people felt that action to safeguard them had not happened quickly enough. In some cases the experiences of young people were not believed and priority was given to the versions of events put forward by parents. For example, Peter disclosed to his head teacher that he was being physically abused at home by his parents and his head teacher referred this to Children's Social Care Services. Despite Peter asking to be taken out of the family home and placed elsewhere, he was returned home and the physical abuse he was suffering escalated. As his situation remained unmonitored, he felt his only option was to escalate the risk to himself to receive a service. One year later, Peter was placed in local authority care. Peter was not the only young person in the sample who felt that their maltreatment experiences had not been responded to quickly enough.

Length of social work involvement and lack of signposting to support were other issues that young people raised. Intervention was often only for a short period and ceased after immediate danger of maltreatment, leaving young people feeling alone. Lack of support was particularly keenly felt by several participants who had been sexually abused and needed help following disclosure. Lisa, aged 15 said:

I think they could have given me and my family more support like afterwards cos it was sort of like as soon as we find out it wasn't going to court or anything and then you're left stuck in that situation. It was like 'oh well' we was left with like the aftermath sort of thing but no support or anything. We were just sort of left to cope with it.

DISCUSSION

In our research, a good quality relationship with a professional was seen as crucial by the young people we interviewed for both disclosure and engagement with services during the referral process to Children's Social Care Services. It was interesting to find that young people almost universally based their opinions of Children's Social Care Services on their relationships with individual social workers. Young people wanted the consistency of one professional to turn to so they had someone they trusted to confide in; were assured that someone was engaged in helping them; and so they were not in the position of having to repeat painful experiences to a stream of new workers. For young people a consistent, long term relationship with a professional throughout the referral process was the most important factor in aiding disclosure. This places young people's needs at odds with the current system, where social workers on duty and assessment teams during the referral process have been unable to build relationships with young people, cases are passed between units within a local authority and young people have to tell their stories to numerous social workers

As demonstrated earlier in this article through young people's reflections, talking to young people on a one-off occasion may not elicit an accurate picture of what is happening to them. Many young people in our sample spoke about being unable to contact social workers during the referral process and this led to disillusionment and concern that social workers were not acting to protect them. Many young people in our study found their initial encounters with statutory services to be confusing and difficult experiences. It is likely that the development of good relationships with young people at the initial stages of contact may help to counteract these more negative experiences (Buckley, et al 2010). In this respect, our research findings add to the existing body of research which has emphasised the centrality of relationships in safeguarding children and young people (Pritchard et al 1998; Munro 2001, 2011a;

Bell 2002; Pinkerton and Dolan 2007; Leeson 2007, 2010; McLeod 2007, 2010; Buckley et al 2010; Schmied and Walsh 2010; Woolfson et al 2010; Cossar, et al 2011).

Previous studies have recognised the importance of trusting relationships in enabling young people to speak about their experiences (Featherstone and Evans 2004, Freaque et al 2007). It is perhaps less frequently recognised that 'disclosure' of abusive experiences is a process and for some children and young people, this process may continue throughout their childhoods, particularly if they remain at home or if they move between home and local authority care. Young people also highlighted the importance of feeling safe and having self-confidence as important pre-conditions to disclose abuse.

It is of interest that despite the young people in our sample being more able to communicate effectively than younger children, there were still significant barriers for them to overcome before talking about abuse. Whilst this finding is not new, in our research this finding contradicted assumptions that were made by many practitioners in our study, who believed that older children were more able to disclose abuse and were less vulnerable than younger children (Rees et al, 2010). Tensions between the needs of parents and young people were also apparent in our study, particularly in relation to the issue of confidentiality and information sharing. These findings suggest that more evidence based training should be given to social workers and more consideration should be given to how to develop 'safe spaces' for young people, based on the model of confidentiality used by ChildLine (Featherstone and Evans, 2004).

The importance of friends to young people who have been abused has also been highlighted in much of the previous research (Butler and Williamson, 1994; Mullender et al, 2002; Featherstone and Evans, 2004; Gorin, 2004) and this finding continues to highlight the need to target more information at young people about forms of abuse and where to seek help. It also suggests that peer mentoring schemes in schools and colleges may be another important way in which young people may be encouraged to disclose maltreatment. Young people also lack information about what is happening to them once they are in the child protection system and about the roles

of individual professionals - a finding that echoes other studies (for example Cossar et al, 2011).

A few young people's accounts in our sample highlighted the lack of priority and slow response that may be given to teenagers when they disclose abuse. The inherent dangers of not acting quickly enough upon young people's reports of maltreatment can be seen in recent serious case reviews (OFSTED 2010). Of specific concern for the 11-17 year old age group and especially those young people age 14+ is that they were viewed as less at risk than younger children and consequently less of a safeguarding priority by many of the social workers we interviewed (Rees et al, 2010). The ability of social workers at the front door of children's services to respond to young people was clearly linked to perceptions of risk for 11-17 year olds, alongside resource issues, such as a lack of social work staff, poor social work retention rates, large volume of referrals and time consuming system processes (Munro 2010). We found that these issues impacted directly on the ability of social workers to build relationships with young people who are referred to Children's Social Care Services.

Another critical message from our research from young people such as Lisa, aged 15 (quoted above) was the need to improve longer term support provision for young people who may receive no further help following disclosure. The lack of support for young people who have experienced abuse, especially sexual abuse has been highlighted in previous studies such as Hooper et al, 2007 and Allnock et al, 2009.

CONCLUSION

Many of the research findings presented in this article echo earlier research conducted with maltreated children and young people. The evidence base of what works best for young people exists and is largely consistent in message. The question for Children Social Care Services and policy makers is why have young people's voices evident in these research studies not so far been successful in influencing change?

Emma (age 14), quoted earlier observed that young people "*have to have a big safety net around them cos if kids don't feel safe they don't do anything*". We have chosen part of this quote as the title for this article because we believe this aptly sums up the

central message from the young people who participated in our study. Young people need consistent, trusting relationships to disclose maltreatment and to enable them to successfully engage with the social care system. Without these crucial relationships young people are likely remain at risk.

It is apparent from the young people we interviewed that the current system does not always meet the needs or expectations of young people who are in need of safeguarding. From young people's perspectives this is because the current safeguarding system does not always allow for the development of relationships which can facilitate disclosures and/or provide protection. Similar difficulties in building positive relationships with young people have been identified across the child protection system (Bell 2002; Saunders & Mace 2006; Leeson 2007, 2010; McLeod 2007, 2010; Munro 2001, 2011a; Cossar et al 2011). In addition, the older age group are not seen as vulnerable as younger children by practitioners, despite evidence to the contrary, and in a system stretched to capacity young people's needs are less likely to be prioritised.

As highlighted by the recent Munro review of Child Protection, the current safeguarding system as it stands is process driven and not designed with the needs of the service user at the forefront. Munro, in her interim report (2011a) highlighted the centrality of relationships for keeping children and young people safe and the first report concluded that *professionals are constrained from keeping a focus on the child due to demands and rigidity created by inspection and regulation* (Munro 2010: 9). At the time of writing, the extent the Munro review will impact upon the lives of young people who are maltreated is unclear, but we hope it will influence local authorities to make the changes necessary to put professional's relationships with young people, and young people themselves, at the heart of the safeguarding agenda.

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